

INFLUENCE | FILM CLUB

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Bill Cunningham New York Discussion Guide

Director: Richard Press

Year: 2010

Time: 84 min

You might know this director from:

BILL CUNNINGHAM NEW YORK is Richard Press' first feature-length documentary film.



FILM SUMMARY

A documentary about a documentarian, **BILL CUNNINGHAM NEW YORK** follows New York photographer, Bill Cunningham, who, for nearly 40 years has been capturing fashion everywhere he goes. Whether it's uptown or downtown, at a fashion show or on a street corner, Bill has his own special criteria of what fashion actually is. He rides his bike around New York City, snapping photographs of those whose style speaks to his finely-tuned fashion sensibility. While he does photograph fashion shows and various highbrow events littered with polished society mavens, his most important work takes place on the city streets. In his view, it's real people expressing their own style who are the real fashion stars.

BILL CUNNINGHAM NEW YORK features interviews with people across the city, including some of the biggest names in fashion who universally admire what Bill does. Even legendary Vogue editor, Anna Wintour, sparkles with warmth as she speaks of him. The film also gives us a glimpse into his meticulous creative process, revealing his strongly held beliefs about fashion, life, and how to live with an integrity that reflects personal values.

No one seems to know much about Bill's private life, and indeed, whenever the filmmaker broaches more personal subjects, Bill insists that he is, essentially, his work. To see people and style through his delighted eyes is to know him thoroughly. This enthusiasm and commitment to his work has given Bill Cunningham a unique place in the worlds of both photography and fashion.

FILM THEMES

This film is a portrait of a graceful, gracious artist simultaneously at work and at play. And of course, there is plenty of fashion and style - according to Bill Cunningham.

WORK AND PLAY

Oftentimes, when we look closely at a creative person, we see that their work has become a singular obsession, coloring everything around them. Bill Cunningham is no exception. Much of his life has been devoted to chronicling fashion according to his own unique criteria of what makes a person worthy of his lens. There is seemingly no distinction between his life and work. "What I do is not work," he says. "It's pleasure. I have fun everyday." Bill could not have created such a substantial fashion narrative if he had not spent most of his waking hours scouring the city for that next trend or that next special look that he feels he must share.

LOVE WHAT YOU DO

Bill Cunningham's eyes sparkle, and a smile is always dancing around the edges of his lips. No matter what he's doing, Bill bubbles with enthusiasm and joy about his work. As he rides his bike snapping pictures of passersby, he grins and gushes about the fabulous outfit he's come across on the street. This enthusiastic joy for his work is infectious, almost childlike, and doesn't appear to be 'work' as most of us know it, but play. The artist, Pablo Picasso, said, "It takes a long time to become young." The 80+ year old Bill has certainly found a way to stay young and fresh, to play and have fun. He's found a new definition for work, and that word seems to be: love.

CELEBRATE, NOT CRITICIZE

The fashion world is not known for being warm and hospitable, but everyone who speaks about Bill Cunningham speaks of his kindness and warmth. He may be something of an enigma to many, but all who have crossed his path are charmed by his inherently good heart. His kindness is also reflected in his work. Never mocking people for their lack of style, Bill prefers to celebrate people and inspire others to express themselves. Criticism and elitism are not for him.

FASHION AND STYLE

In Bill's view, fashion is the armor we wear as we face everyday life, and a great outfit has the capacity to make our days more exciting, fun, and perhaps even more bearable. He is inspired by people expressing themselves through fashion, taking what's on the runway and giving it a new spin, or starting a trend through the sheer force of personal style. For him, these are more stimulating than celebrities who wear a free dress chosen by a faceless stylist. He prefers those who use fashion as an expression of their personal style and personality, as a way of projecting who they are to the world, communicating something beyond words. To Bill Cunningham, that truly is fashion.

"The best fashion show is definitely on the street. Always has been, and always will be."

Bill Cunningham

"A master in the art of living draws no sharp distinction between his work and play. He simply pursues his vision of excellence in whatever he is doing and leaves others to decide whether he is working or playing. To himself, he always appears to be doing both."

Chateaubriand

FILM FACTS:

- When director Richard Press is asked how long it took to make **BILL CUNNINGHAM NEW YORK**, he says ten years: eight to convince Bill to be filmed and two to shoot and edit the film.
- Bill's reticence in being filmed set the practical terms for filmmaking. A camera crew, sound recorder, and boom operator were impossible. Richard Press had to capture Bill the way he claims to capture his own subjects: "discreetly, quietly, and invisibly." The film was made without a crew, relying on small, handheld consumer cameras so that Bill wouldn't feel intruded upon.
- Bill Cunningham was once a milliner (a person who makes or sells women's hats) to celebrities. His business folded when he was drafted into the U.S. Army.
- Bill says he has never had a personal romantic relationship in his entire life, choosing instead to devote himself to his work.
- Bill attended Harvard University, dropping out to move to New York City, where his first career was in advertising.
- Bill had a falling-out with *Women's Wear Daily*, never working with the newspaper again after they edited the focus of a story he had written from one of celebrating real people to one of mocking them.
- Bill never eats at home and considers food unimportant. He refuses to eat at any event that he is photographing, feeling it would compromise his integrity.
- Bill's New York Times column, *Street Style*, has been running since 1979.
- Bill worked for the original *Details* magazine for free, saying, "If you don't take the money they can't tell you what to do." Often, he would get more than 90 pages of photographs in the magazine each month.
- Bill does not consider himself a photographer, but rather a historian who documents and archives what he sees in his world.
- Bill's foray into street photography coincided with the explosion of street fashion in the 1960s. Many consider Cunningham a driving force of street fashion and vice versa.
- Bill attends church weekly and finds that his Catholic religion gives him guidance in life.
- According to *Vogue* editor-in-chief, Anna Wintour: "We all get dressed for Bill." Wintour ruefully admits that it's devastating when she knows that Bill is disappointed in her.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Give others the chance to be inspired by Bill Cunningham's delighting personality, talent, and integrity. Consider discussing the film after watching to dig deeper into its valuable message.
2. Support artists in your local community by attending their events and supporting their efforts.
3. Grab your camera and start documenting your own corner of the world. Share it with the world.
4. Encourage those around you to find what they love and support them in their pursuit.
5. Consider whether you truly love what you do in your work or career. Are you living your dreams? Have you tried to accomplish them? If not, why not? How could you begin orchestrating your life as you would like?

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.